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ABSTRACT

This digest presents a discussion of key policy issues confronting higher education in the age of distance learning, and discusses implications for the community college. Existing educational practices cannot accommodate distance education without corresponding shifts in the fundamental views of teaching and learning as well as in state, federal, and institutional policies. Policy issues include campus leaders' priorities for implementing distance education methods, as well as faculty acceptance and participation, especially regarding ease of use in technological systems. Distance education will more likely be adopted if it is perceived to be compatible with the college's mission and effective from both an academic and cost perspective. Implications for community colleges include solving access and resource challenges, concern over the issues of copyright and intellectual property rights, and the establishment of virtual universities this decade. The digest concludes that, with wider implementation of distance learning, the focus of educational organizations will shift from teaching to learning. Adapting to this shift will require educational organizations to adopt new approaches for defining faculty work and securing funds for new technology. (AS)

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Digest

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Policy Development for Distance Education

by Vivian Chang

Distance education has the potential to offer new learning opportunities unrestricted by time, distance, or individual differences among students. However, existing educational practices cannot accommodate distance education without corresponding shifts in the fundamental views of teaching and learning as well as in state, federal, and institutional policies (Dillon & Cintrón, 1997). This *Digest* presents a discussion of key policy issues confronting higher education in the age of distance learning and discusses the implications for the community college.

Policy Issues

As with any pedagogical change, successful implementation of technology is dependent upon faculty acceptance and participation. However, little research has been done to understand faculty members' adaptation to technology and the changes in the psychological and physical environments brought about through distance learning. Therefore it is crucial for institutional policy makers to develop a thorough understanding of faculty experiences in the distance learning environment before implementing new procedures (Parisot, 1997).

According to a study by Parisot (1997), ease of use is a primary factor in the adoption of technological innovation by faculty. Technology must also be consistent with existing values, and there needs to be a real educational value beyond the use of technology for its own sake. The study also found that faculty tend to be teacher-centered rather than student-centered and tend to view technology as an aid for current teaching strategies rather than as a vehicle for developing new approaches. To address potential faculty resistance, Parisot (1997) developed a conceptual framework for consensus building. Its steps include acknowledgment of the need for change, awareness of the potential impact of technology, acculturation to new ways of teaching and learning, and affirmation by faculty to adopt the innovation.

In addition to building faculty support, Lape and Hart (1997) contend it is crucial to determine what campus leaders know about distance education, the importance they place on distance education methods, and whether or not differences in opinion exist among the various leadership groups. They also suggest that distance education will more likely be adopted if it is perceived to be compatible with the college's mission and effective from both an academic and cost perspective.

A potential barrier to the adoption of distance education is the lack of data supporting its need (Lape & Hart, 1997). The acceptance of technological solutions, especially a costly innovation such as distance education, justified by perceived rather than real needs may result in an inefficient use of resources and a negative climate for innovation. Such conditions make the future of distance education somewhat precarious.

Policy Development

Until recently, most states had few policies addressing distance education. This situation is predicted to change in the near future as states enter a period of highly active policymaking, and compelling reasons exist for community colleges to be leading players in the process (Kovel-Jarboe, 1997).

One critical policy issue at the state level is the development of a seamless educational system in which students can learn through multiple organizational frameworks (Spears & Tatroe, 1997). This means providing educational opportunities at home, in schools, or in the workplace through a system that integrates training, credit offerings, and mandatory education. Partnerships between K-12 schools and community colleges are an important starting place in the exploration of the technological, political, and organizational factors needed to support a seamless education system. One such partnership exists between Pikes Peak Community College (PPCC) and schools in east-central Colorado. The institutions share delivery options such as interactive television, telecourses, Internet, print-based independent study, audio-graphics, and on-site delivery courses. Relationships of this type demonstrate the need for formulating new operational guidelines. In this case, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's guidelines dictate minimum quality standards at the regional level; at the state level, the Colorado Post-Secondary Options Act and the State Reimbursement Procedures for Student Enrollment policy provide financial incentives for this partnership (Spears & Tatroe, 1997).

Sorenson (1997) writes that the advent of new technologies, learning partnerships, and subsequent policies raises questions about the need for evaluation. She also cautions that meeting the needs of the local institutions, state and sometimes federal agencies may lead to complex evaluation plans, which can ultimately affect the activities of the institutions involved.

For example, Iowa's community colleges participated in the development and evaluation of the state's distance education system (Sorenson, 1997). Among the challenges they faced in the process was the need to have all educational entities in the system agree on the importance of evaluation and the indicators of success. A second challenge was to ensure consistent data collection across the state without requiring unreasonable demands on personnel at local institutions. A third challenge was presented with the establishment of national evaluation indicators for schools receiving federal

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funds to promote the use of telecommunications. The evaluation plan ultimately developed by Iowa's community colleges was consistent with the national indicators, and also incorporated state goals.

Implications for Community Colleges

Distance learning and the use of telecommunications to deliver instruction has been the subject of ongoing research and legislation, often with the goal of using these tools to solve access and resource challenges. One positive outcome of this inquiry, as seen in states such as Florida, is the practical application of technology to state-wide issues such as decreasing students' time-to-degree (Dallet & Opper, 1997).

On the other hand, the advent of new communication technologies has heightened concern over the issues of copyright and intellectual property rights (McIsaac & Rowe,1997). The explosive use of the Internet further exacerbates these problems. Therefore, McIsaac and Rowe (1997) encourage the development of policies that address copyright, fair use, duplication, and revenue generation for both print and non-print educational materials. Some key elements to address in institutional policies of this nature include: 1) efforts to educate and increase awareness about copyright and intellectual property issues and institutional policies; 2) ways to gain licenses and copyrights; 3) resources to find licensed, originally produced materials; 3) criteria for establishing ownership of materials produced by faculty, students, and the institution; and 4) consequences for violation of institutional policies.

The establishment of virtual universities this decade presents another set of issues for community colleges. Johnstone and Tilson (1997) indicate that the Western Governors University, like other virtual university frameworks, must make some critical decisions about teaching and learning to ensure quality. Another challenge to community college administrators is the development of a paraprofessional staff to serve students, many of whom may be engaged in study at multiple institutions (Johnstone & Tilson, 1997). Financial aid policies also need to be reformulated to meet the needs of distant students.

Johnstone and Tilson (1997) also write of two major roles that community colleges can assume in order to play an integral role in the expanding influence of virtual universities. First, community colleges can function as sending institutions by providing instruction to students electronically. The second area of consideration involves the college's position as a student access and service center within a virtual university. A community college thus becomes a one-stop educational shopping center for its local constituency. Johnstone and Tilson (1997) point out that the partnership of local community colleges with the regional virtual university will serve an essential purpose in a new higher education environment by refocusing many traditional systems and mechanisms.

Conclusion

In the future, colleges will no longer choose between audio or video systems, between interactive or independent systems, or between one-way or two-way systems (Dillon & Cintrón, 1997). A single wire will provide everything by connecting the classroom, the library, the workplace, and the home. The challenge will be to choose the most practical combination of learning experiences based on a trade-off between the costs and capabilities of a vast array of media options. In this environment, the focus of educational organizations will shift from teaching to learning. Adapting to this shift will require educational organizations to adopt new approaches for defining faculty work and securing funds for new technology. Despite the changes and lingering uncertainties, distance education is key to dissolving learning boundaries.

References

This *Digest* is drawn from *New Directions for Community Colleges*, Number 99, edited by Connie L. Dillon and Rosa Cintrón, published in Fall 1997: "Building a Working Policy for Distance Education." The cited articles include: "Reducing Time-to-Degree with Distance Learning: Are We Closer Now Than When We Started?" by Patrick Dallet and John H. Opper; "Distance Education and the Community College: From Convention to Vision," by Connie L. Dillon and Rosa Cintrón; "Implications of a Virtual University for Community Colleges," by Sally M. Johnstone and Stephen Tilson; "From the Margin to the Mainstream: State-Level Policy and Planning for Distance Education," by Patricia Kovel-Jarboe; "Changing the Way We Teach by Changing the College: Leading the Way Together," by Douglas H. Lape and Patricia K. Hart; "Ownership and Access: Copyright and Intellectual Property in the On-Line Environment," by Marina Stock McIsaac and Jeremy Rowe; "Distance Education as a Catalyst for Changing Teaching in the Community College: Implications for Institutional Policy," by Arlene H. Parisot; "Localizing National Standards for Evaluation of Distance Education: An Example from a Multistate Project," by Christine K. Sorensen; and "Seamless Education Through Distance Learning: State Policy Initiatives for Community College/K-12 Partnerships," by Suzanna Spears and Randy L. Tatroe.

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